

# Emerging Trends in Violent Riots

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In the early morning of June 22, a young girl's body was discovered in a river in Guizhou province's Weng'an County. Her death was initially ruled a suicide by the local authorities, but the family of the deceased 17 year old protested that she was murdered by relatives of government officials. The crime, they said, was being covered up by the local authorities. At the outset, the conflict was limited to the family and the police, but once the perception of an abuse of power by the Chinese elite spread, tens of thousands became enraged. Four days after the girl's body was found, over 30,000 rioters in Weng'an torched both the local public security bureau and the county government office building, along with nearby government vehicles.<sup>1</sup> The events that transpired after the initial discovery of the dead girl touched upon some of the most sensitive issues currently rankling Chinese citizens.

Catalyzing the actions of the rioters was a more profound sense of social discontent, reflecting a present crisis of governance in China. After three decades of rapid economic development, China's political system is increasingly incapable of harmonizing relations between the disparate interest groups that exist in the market economy. The government's failure to establish a just and equitable adjudication system to arbitrate between them has engendered widespread social despair. These deficiencies have led to accumulated grievances, "priming" the public, so that otherwise

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isolated incidents are precipitating devastating violent anger-venting riots.

While incidents of mass social unrest in China can usually be classified as rights-protection struggles, social disputes or protests against organized crime,<sup>2</sup> the riots in Guizhou were part of a new and troublesome trend. Unlike the established categories of social unrest, this new breed of riot lacks a specific grievance. They are precipitated by accidental conflicts between private citizens, but they quickly escalate into large and often extremely violent mobs, with most rioters having little connection to the causal incident. Bystanders join in the violence to vent their own resentment at unfair practices of local government. As news of the incident spreads through modern communication channels, mobs can quickly swell to over 10,000 people.

### **Old Grievances, New Violence**

The first characteristic that distinguishes anger-venting riots from other instances of social unrest is the rapid escalation to violence. Rights-protection activities usually show a degree of restraint since the protestors are invested in the outcome and inciting violence is unlikely to achieve their aims. Anger-venting riots are often devoid of specific issues, or quickly become divorced from the original issue. These riots devolve into behavior such as smashing, looting and burning. Caught up in the action, participants commit acts that are out of character.

The events that transpired in Dazhu, Sichuan in 2007 are an example of this behavior.<sup>3</sup> A female employee was found murdered at the Laishide Hotel. During the police investigation, the family of the deceased engaged in a heated confrontation with the hotel's owners. Afterwards, the family, accompanied by a crowd of several hundred people, returned to the hotel to demand a verdict on the investigation. With the issue still unresolved two days later, it mushroomed into widespread riots with over 10,000 people descending on the Laidshide Hotel, smashing and burning property.

Similarly, 2004 riots in Wanzhou began when two pedestrians collided while crossing the street.<sup>4</sup> A porter surnamed Yu accidentally struck a female surnamed Zeng with the pole balanced on his shoulders. Both Zeng and her husband retaliated with violence, the latter claiming that he was a civil servant and therefore not to be trifled with. The crowd of onlookers grew indignant at the couple's abusive behavior and, perceiving police bias in the handling the event, quickly started large-scale rioting.

The second characteristic of these riots is their lack of organization and leadership. Unlike a political or economic protest, the vast majority of participants have no direct stake in the outcome of the incident. Those involved are usually observers, even passersby, simply reacting to perceived injustices. They take advantage of the situation to display frustration about their own personal grievances, expressing dis-

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satisfaction with social injustice, or some other abstracted reason for venting their anger. For example, a 2005 incident in Chizhou, Anhui province, began after a young man was struck by a car carrying a well-connected businessman from nearby Anqing.<sup>5</sup> An altercation ensued in which bodyguards of the businessman emerged from the car to “beat the skinny young man senseless, leaving him bleeding from his mouth and ears.”<sup>6</sup> Upset by the scene, citizens called the police but once again, perceived police bias in the handling of the conflict – in this case protecting ostensibly affluent and well-connected assailants – incited a crowd of onlookers to violently pursue mob justice. By 6pm the crowd had grown to roughly 10,000 people with no unified leadership or agenda. Uncoordinated acts of violence included flipping over the car driven by men who had assaulted Liu, pushing a police car to block the entrance to the police station, setting on fire two unrelated government vehicles and looting a nearby supermarket. Unlike rights-protection struggles, the Chizhou incident had no specific social grievance to redress and no representatives with whom the police might negotiate in order to bring the violence and destruction to an end.<sup>7</sup>

A third characteristic of this trend in unrest is the effective use of modern technology, particularly text messages and the internet. These play an important role in inciting and inflaming unrest. Historically, social discontent was expressed through folk songs, popular rhymes, political jokes and gossip. Today, the ubiquity of affordable mobile phones and the internet has made news dissemination much more convenient, effective and influential. While these forms of communication can act as outlets for venting public anger and indignation in a constructive way, they may also further aggravate tense situations. Because these irrational rantings reach so many people, they can easily lead to collective angst and panic, which may in turn lead to collective violent action. This characteristic is illustrated by the Zhejiang Province Rui-an incident of 2006.<sup>8</sup>

On the morning of Aug 18, a 29 year old teacher at the Number 3 Middle School in Rui-an city leapt from a building in an apparent act of suicide. The woman's husband and in-laws attributed her death to work-related pressures. The police investigation concurred. However, the students of Number 3 Middle School rejected this conclusion. Rumors circulated on the internet that Dai had been murdered by her husband's family and that they had used their wealth to bribe the police. Two days after her death, several hundred students from her school organized



a protest calling for a proper investigation. On Sept. 5, the Criminal Investigation unit of Wenzhou city completed an autopsy report confirming that Dai had committed suicide probably due to a mental disorder. People rumored to be involved in bribing investigators were surrounded by a crowd. But a convoy of more than 200 police vehicles with special units used tear gas to disperse the crowds. Rumors of police complicity circulated via text messages and the internet, along with appeals for further protests. By the second day after the autopsy results were released, several thousand citizens responded to these appeals, organizing groups to launch protests at the town hall and police station. In this case, internet and cellular communication aided in exacerbating the public's sense of injustice to a degree sufficient to spark random, violent rioting.

### **A Crisis of Confidence**

While there is a diverse range of discontents driving social unrest in China, judicial corruption and unfairness are the most widespread grievances. At the heart of the matter is a loss of faith in the government's ability to adjudicate and harmonize frictions between different interest groups. In the last decade the Chinese public's declining confidence has exhibited new features. First, mistrust has expanded from skepticism in particular public servants to dissatisfaction with the larger political system. Historically, the Chinese public's social discontent was directed at specific government employees, blaming the various social problems on the corruption and incompetence of local state and party officials. The effectiveness of local government, however, has deteriorated to the point of failing to provide the necessary public goods and services, and has even become a vehicle of state violence. As such, the public no longer makes a distinction between isolated public employees and the body of local government. Both are seen as culpable and both are perceived as the enemy.

Closely related to this is the distrust that is also moving "upstream" in terms of level of government. This problem is particularly evident in the countryside.<sup>9</sup> A decade ago, peasants only questioned the illegal behavior of village level cadres, while maintaining hope in county level or higher governments. Now many peasants believe both village and county governments are irredeemable and principally to blame for their troubles. Some even regard provincial level government as the chief culprit. Although many peasants currently maintain hope in the central government, they are growing doubtful about its ability to handle these issues.<sup>10</sup>

Lastly, the public expresses doubt in the justice and equity of the legal system. Legitimacy is an acknowledgment of the power and ability to rule. This legitimacy should be underpinned by a sound legal system and judicial equity. The most direct

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means for various interest groups and harmful social elements to undermine the State legitimacy is through the justice system. Those elements can use the protection provided by members of the judiciary to commit illegal acts. Or, persons within the judiciary can abuse their positions for personal benefit. These realities have had a huge impact on the public's view of the law. It's not uncommon to hear people refer to "official-gang partnership" or "police-bandit kinship" to express their despair at the national legal system.

The above three features of a growing crisis in confidence of state legitimacy are symptomatic of profound social discontent. In all of the aforementioned riots, the intervention of representatives of the State public security apparatus not only failed to convince enraged onlookers that justice would be served, but often further incited discontent in the State's inability or unwillingness to fairly adjudicate the conflict.

### **Responding to Unrest**

While the government cannot prevent isolated events from triggering mass discontent, it can ameliorate the consequences with early warning mechanisms, better handling techniques, freer dissemination of information and increased accountability.

The first key to preventing violence in the streets is to address the complaints of citizens early on. Currently, the State Bureau of Letters and Calls is meant to fulfill this role; however, local governments often go to great lengths to hide poor conditions in their prefectures. For instance, a local county government office in Henan province ordered lower level officials to travel to Beijing to bribe the State Bureau of Letters and Calls (*guojia xinfang bumen*). The purpose of their mission was clear: to get the Bureau to block as many complaints from getting to the central government as possible.<sup>11</sup> The effectiveness of this method is impressive. During the first three months of 2007, 25 missions (involving a total of 65 people) from a single county in Hunan set off for Beijing to register complaints. Only one of them made it to the books. Forty-one missions (involving a total of 55 people) from the same county embarked on a trip to the provincial government to register complaints, with only seven of these entering the books.<sup>12</sup> This suggests that the National Complaints Bureau and the Hunan Complaints Bureau are rife with corruption, and as a result, the Central Government's policy-makers are denied access to information. As such, the local government lacks an early warning mechanism for social discontent which makes it impossible to preemptively halt the deterioration of social order.<sup>13</sup> For sound policy-making to occur, a fast-response mechanism sensitive to public input and opinions must be implemented.

In order to learn from the political situations that lead to rioting, independent investigation committees should be formed. These committees must operate independently from the government yet still have the authority to command the participation of all relevant parties in their investigations. They should arrive at an impartial

evaluation of the incident in question, something that is currently improbable, if not impossible, under the current system.

When directly addressing the problem of violent riots, the government must first establish a social and political information collection network to coincide with a scientific evaluation system. Currently, many local governments collect data on unrest, but that information is rarely circulated, leaving researchers with little to work with. The government would also benefit by releasing this data so that experts can establish analysis models, which can, in turn, can provide social and political stability information indices to decision-makers and the public. Through this collection and analysis, public opinion will be better understood, interventions will become more efficient, and social disturbances can be more easily avoided.

Furthermore, China's community policing system must be strengthened. The 2005 French riots demonstrated that when police forces and the communities in which they patrol do not identify with each other, an antagonistic relationship could develop.<sup>14</sup> The Chinese government is aware of this problem. By the end of June 2007, the public security departments across China had set up over 56,000 community police offices, containing almost 100,000 community policemen; and roughly 88,000 village police offices, containing an equal number of village policemen. The creation of these village police offices has not only increased communication between the people and law enforcement, it has improved public opinion of police forces and has even decreased the number of riots.<sup>15</sup>

Mass events such as violent riots need to be adjudicated according to existing laws. The *Emergency Response Law of the People's Republic of China* took effect in November of 2007. Among other important issues, the law mandates that in a time when public safety is breached, select government departments and public security organs are entrusted with "the use of force to isolate persons in the conflict using weapons or violent means to continue the disturbance." The law also contains a number of restrictions, thereby increasing accountability and preventing the abuse of power. It identifies and protects the rights and legitimate interests of citizens,

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legal personnel and other organizations. The law makes clear government culpability in regard to riots. Personnel directly responsible might face dismissal, removal or other administrative sanctions, and some might even be criminally liable.<sup>16</sup> The problem, however, is the insufficient flow of information. The local governments are utilizing legal loopholes or blocking complaints and other information from reaching higher-level govern-

ments. Reliable information about social conditions should be seen as strategic resource, while the development of scientific information systems can guide the government in addressing social unrest. Only in this way can the combustible public

discontent generated by the spread of rumors be avoided.

In addressing social unrest, a balance must be achieved. On one hand, the government must better manage and make better use of resources to preserve social stability. On the other hand, if the government exerts excessive control, the public will lose trust in their leaders. As long as there continues to be little understanding of social unrest in China, attempts at broadly addressing the issue will continue to be ineffective. The Chinese government, like any other government, cannot completely avoid all incidents of social unrest. It can, however, work to create a mature political society in which citizens can trust their government to protect with impartiality and dispense justice fairly. ☹

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Ding Buzhi, "Causes of Wén'an Riot," *Southern Weekly*, July 1, 2008, Page 1.
- <sup>2</sup> See Yu Jianrong "Social Conflict in Rural China," *China Security*, Vol. 3 No. 2, Spring 2007.
- <sup>3</sup> Ren Luo and Chen Kai, "Reflections on the Dazhu Incident in Sichuan: Local Government Busy with Term Changes Missed the Good Opportunity to Handle the Situation," *Outlook News Weekly*, Mar. 1, 2007.
- <sup>4</sup> Fan Weiguo, "A Temporary Worker in Wanzhou, Chongqing Pretended to be Social Servant and Beat Other People, Triggering off a Mass Event," *Beijing Youth Daily*, Oct. 20, 2004.
- <sup>5</sup> Wang Jilu, "An Investigation of the Chizhou Mass Event in Anhui: an ordinary car accident turned into riot," *Southern Metropolis Daily*, July 1, 2005.
- <sup>6</sup> Edward Cody, "A Chinese City's Rage At the Rich And Powerful," *The Washington Post*, Aug. 1, 2005.
- <sup>7</sup> Wu Zhihong and Tang Fuxian, "The Riots in Chizhou," *Chizhou Daily*, June 27, 2005.
- <sup>8</sup> Pan Shengfan and Chen Haifeng, "Follow-up of a Female Teacher Falling from a Building in Rui'an: depression caused suicide," *Wenzhou Dushibao*, Sept. 10, 2006.
- <sup>9</sup> Wu Shujie, "Analysis of Hierarchy in the Political Crisis of Legitimacy in the Process of Modernization," *Theory and Reform*, Issue 4, 2003.
- <sup>10</sup> Zhou Zuohan and Zhang Yinghong, "The Review of China's Rural Study From the Reform," *Contemporary World & Socialism*, Issue 3, 2007.
- <sup>11</sup> Zou Yongkun, "The Tides of Letters and Calls of Complaints from the People and the Path Selection of the Dispute Resolution Mechanism of China," *Journal of Jinan University (Philosophy & Social Science Edition)*, Issue 1, 2006.
- <sup>12</sup> Huang Huo, "The Risks of Institutional Flaws," *Outlook Magazine*, Issue 4, 2007.
- <sup>13</sup> Ding Shuimu et al, *Theory and Practice on Social Stability* (Zhejiang Zhejiang People's Publishing House, 1997) pp. 282-283.
- <sup>14</sup> Zhang Jun, "The Analysis of French Riots," *Etudes Francaises*, Issue 4, 2007.
- <sup>15</sup> Yu Jianrong, Review to Guizhou Wén'an Riot, *Nanfengchuang Magazine*, Issue 15, 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> *The Emergency Response Law of the People's Republic of China*, ratified by National People's Congress, October, 2007, see <http://www.gdemo.gov.cn/zt/tfsjydf/>.